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FRENCHMEN AND DETECTIVE STORIES.

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BECAUSE COURSES IN FRENCH CULTURE SEEM TO BE TOO NARROWLY ORGANIZED AND LIMITED, THEY LACK THE COMPLEX CONTEXT THAT IS PRESENT IN "REAL LIFE." A BETTER WAY TO GET YOUNG AMERICAN STUDENTS TO SEE AND UNDERSTAND THE FRENCH WAY OF LIFE OR VIEW OF THE WORLD IS THROUGH A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION. SPECIFICALLY, THE FRENCH DETECTIVE STORY, WITH A FRENCH SETTING, AN ASSORTMENT OF TYPICAL FRENCH CHARACTERS, AND WRITTEN IN "NEUTRAL" OR NON-LITERARY LANGUAGE, COULD BE THE IDEAL MEDIUM BY WHICH TO KNOW FRENCH CULTURE. THERE IS AN ADDITIONAL ADVANTAGE IN THAT THIS KIND OF FICTION IS WELL SUITED TO HOLDING THE INTEREST OF YOUNG READERS. (THIS DOCUMENT WAS DELIVERED AS A SPEECH TO THE CONNECTICUT CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF FRENCH, NOVEMBER 5, 1966.) (OC)

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Frenchmen and Detective Stories

Let us consider the process whereby young Frenchmen become 'acculturated' or 'enculturated' -- the latter is perhaps the more usual term now -- that is, the process whereby those born into French society gradually accumulate, in more or less systematic fashion as they grow up, a cultural baggage in terms of which they understand one another, their elders, and their own literature -- and the word literature is to be understood in this context in its broadest possible meaning; a little later on, we will spell out such a meaning in more detail.

By 'cultural baggage' I mean, of course, not only facts and figures, names and dates, but semiconscious or quite unconscious patterns of preference or prejudice, action and reaction, that are predictible, expected by other participants in the same culture; the total 'cultural baggage' of a 'typical' member of a given society (or subgroup within a society) constitutes a system: its component parts stand in statable, systematic relations to one another. What we might call the 'shape' of the total accumulation of such baggage is constantly changing as new items are added to it, which means that each young Frenchman approaches each new additional item -- each new socio-culturally significant experience -- with a significantly different baggage from the one with which he had approached all earlier notions. The process of acquiring what we are calling cultural baggage does not begin at any neatly and tidily fixable point (toward the end of the first year of a child's life for instance) nor does it come to a neat and tidy end (for instance at the end of his formal schooling). Every participant in every culture is constantly acquiring more of that culture and each bit added to his cultural baggage enriches and complicates it and thereby renders the process of acquisition of the next item to be added to it at least slightly more complex. The rate of acquisition of new 'bits' varies enormously of course; it is greatest in early childhood and during the years of formal schooling. The relative importance of each new item varies, at the same time; in the early stages of the process, each new item is proportionately very important, while the effect of the 'average' new 'bit' diminishes in direct proportion as the system of interrelated 'bits' to which it is added becomes more complex.

Now, traditionally -- and quite necessarily, I think -- the teaching of literature has been considered by all concerned to be one of the principal objectives of the teaching of language, native or foreign. Let us postpone for a few

minutes a detailed examination of what it seems legitimate to mean by literature and see first where we are led by commitment to this objective.

Everyone who teaches literature -- as this word is generally understood -- surely realizes that the reader of any given 'literary' work must have in his knapsack, so to speak, a large assortment of items or 'bits' of the kind we have been talking about if he is to understand what he reads. The teacher of a foreign language and literature soon realizes that the cultural baggage required to read that foreign literature differs in obvious and definable ways from the assortment of facts, figures and attitudes needed to read his own native literature (which is usually the same literature that is 'native' for his students). We are all very familiar indeed with the footnotes at the bottom of the page or the notes at the end of the chapter (or the back of the book) with which an industrious editor, with all the good intentions in the world, has attempted to supply for the young American 'reader' -- if this word be indeed appropriate! -- items of information, frames of reference, insights, and so on, which he cannot normally be expected to possess as a participant in the American culture of which he is a product, but which the writer of the French literary work he is being asked to read presumes his reader to possess, precisely because those items of information, insights, and so on, are part of the usual, 'expectable' cultural baggage of those who have been brought up to view the world 'in French terms'. The word expectable, although admittedly clumsy -- for the which I apologize! -- is crucial; we all perform most of the acts of our ordinary, daily lives in full confidence that we know what, in normal circumstances, we can legitimately expect other people to do, provided, of course, that we have enough information about the specific individuals involved in any one situation to enable us to predict their behavior in terms of the typical -- the expectable -- behavior of such people, in our society and in such situations! It seems to me that it is not at all unreasonable to suggest that one clearly desirable ultimate goal of undergraduate college instruction in a foreign language -- and here I am talking both of majors and of those students who go on to do work beyond what they must do to satisfy a language requirement -- ought to be to bring those students to a point where they no longer need to depend on edited texts; to equip them, that is, to brouse easily in French bookshops, buy what seems interesting and sit down and

read it with approximately the same background with which a native French speaker would approach such books. (The word approximately is very important in such discussions; we must remain realistic!)

The groundwork for such mastery of a foreign language must be laid long before the student reaches the college or university, and the construction of those essential foundations requires the sophisticated, coordinated labors of dedicated teachers from the grade schools through the high schools. Much time and patience are required to lead young minds to discover for themselves the diversity of ways which groups of human animals have evolved in order to survive and prosper in this world. The best way to lead them to a realization that such diversity exists is to create situations in which, with a modicum of guidance, they will discover for themselves the relativity of much of what seems to them, from within their own culture, to be 'natural', 'absolute', 'obvious'; the most economical way in which to create such situations is to plunge the youngster into a carefully-planned, sustained 'bath' in a foreign way of looking at the world and of dealing with it! Clearly, in today's complex world, we cannot afford to spend more than a certain part of the total schooling of our young on even so important an objective as this one, and this practical consideration dictates that we make the most of ample experience of one foreign language and culture; that foreign language must, therefore, be important, and French is without question, one of the few languages obviously suited to this purpose.

As we have already seen, one of the problems with which we must deal in this whole discussion is the definition of literature; to begin with, we must come to grips with the expression reading French literature. I think that it is fair to say that there is still prevalent among teachers of French in this country today -- and this has been the case for a long, long while -- a more or less unspoken, semiconscious conviction that French is ultimately -- when the 'superficial' differences are removed -- an 'alternative code' for dealing with reality, the same reality with which English speakers are able to deal effectively by means of the English language. This pernicious notion, for which -- in the estimation of a great many serious students of language and culture -- there is no justification, has led, in fact, to the creation in our schools of our various departments of 'language and literature' -- beginning with our 'English' departments with their

courses in 'world literature', in which the student is led by his instructor to search for 'universal human values', or 'universal human experience' which, he is too often assured, is reflected through all ages and in all cultures in the 'great literary works' of sensitive human beings; the student is led, in other words, to look first and foremost for those things which prove that 'all men are alike', that 'we are all brothers' -- that whatever differences of a cultural order may seem to separate us from one another are fundamentally trivial and, once identified, can be safely overlooked. If, however, we start from an entirely different premise, if we assume rather that French culture, for instance, is a largely self-contained, historically determined phenomenon and that it codifies a basically systematic view of reality which is essentially internally coherent (self-consistent) which includes the intellectual, social, political and economic institutions of France as they have evolved through the centuries -- the 'French way of life', in other words -- and, on the other hand, that Americans have grown up in a world which is equally self-contained and internally coherent and which is also historically determined (which, in other words, American children inherit from their 'linguistic ancestors') then we must conclude, in view of the very different histories of these two peoples, that it is in no way surprising that the way the young Frenchman comes to see the world differs perceptibly and predictibly from the way in which young Americans view it or that participants in these two cultures react in different ways to what may seem to be the 'same' stimuli! It is well worth emphasizing, in this context that the gap between the French Weltanschauung and the American 'view of the world' is really quite wide, in spite of the fact that these two national cultures have evolved in close geographical, political and social proximity to one another and have exerted very considerable 'influence' on one another for many centuries (no matter what, in this instance, we may severally or collectively understand that poor, bedraggled, overworked word influence to mean!).

To sum up, then, the American student of French must -- ideally -- be brought to the point where he no longer needs any other footnotes than those needed by Frenchmen of comparable background, age and status; that is to say, in so many words, that he must be brought to the point where he no longer needs school-books! -- editions of French books especially prepared for Americans -- and let us

be quite specific, for after all, we are talking about Americans, and not foreigners in general; Americans clearly require explanation of some things that would be quite clear to young Germans, for instance, while Germans will find mysterious some references or points of view that Americans take for granted (all of this will have a familiar ring indeed for those of you who have been through an NDEA summer institute!).

Now, the problem is -- to put the matter simply -- that the necessary information (at least the essential information) that the American student needs to read French as the French read French, is in fact often supplied in our curricula, but it is usually supplied in an inappropriate way. It is supplied separately, in courses in French culture, 'in the anthropological sense' -- as the phrase goes. That is to say that the young American is systematically taught a number of 'facts' and certain notions about the ways in which those facts can be expected typically to hang together; the chapter headings are always more or less the same: The French Schools, French Political Institutions, etc., not to mention the inevitable fifteen pages of general introduction to the geography of l'Hexagone, while the political history of the place gets two or even three whole chapters! What is wrong with this way of presenting the material is precisely that the Frenchman does not see these things quite this way; he acquires a very large part of the baggage with which he travels through life and literature not in formal schoolbook instruction but 'by the seat of his pants' -- as it comes at him at home, in the streets, and during his waking hours in all of the manifold situations and circumstances in which he lives, before, during and after his formal schooling. Then too, the 'school-larning' he absorbs is not devoid of slanting; I use this word in a clinical sense to mean simply that the information he meets in his texts on history, economics, etc. (especially on the pre-university level), has been selected and organized in the light of a set of preferences, prejudices and preconceptions most of which are quite thoroughly subliminal in the minds of those who make the selection and write the presentation. In other words, the majority (I will hazard this kind of quantification) of the attitudes to which such 'facts and figures' are inextricably and systematically related as they function as elements in a semantic system in the mind of the speaker of French are acquired semiconsciously by the young Frenchman as he

grows up surrounded by people who hold those views and who, willingly or no, inculcate them into him by the very ways in which they -- his models -- react to those 'facts and figures' as stimuli to perceptible social behavior. Obviously, the effect of a given Frenchman's reaction, in any particular instance, will depend very largely on his status in the eyes of those who observe him in search of some indication of the value they ought to attach to a fact or a figure. The situation is greatly complicated, first, by the importance that the young attach to the opinions of those whose status in their own lives is firmly established, and, secondly, by the variation from one social class to another in the very standards according to which that status is determined.

In a nutshell, then, the principal reason why overt, orderly training in 'culture in the anthropological sense' as we have described it is not a good solution of the problem is precisely that it is too well organized, too conscious, too devoid of the kind of complex, complicated and often unclear context that only 'real life' can provide. The obvious retort at this juncture is that the only way the student can assure himself of the depth and fulness of comprehension that I suggest he needs if he is to approach French literature and flesh-and-blood Frenchmen 'on their own terms', is to have the wisdom and foresight to take the precaution to be born French! So, in fact, it would seem. It seems that by the very nature of the situation -- we are, after all, trying to teach a foreign language and culture to young people who are already largely enculturated within their own world -- we are condemned to failure.

I suggest, however, that there is a middle way. (Like most middle ways it is, in fact, a very thin razor's edge, fraught with peril, for gaping chasms of exaggeration yawn threateningly on either side!) Let us consider the fact that with increasing frequency it is possible in American schools at all levels to make use of motion-pictures, filmstrips and similar visual aids to convey some sense of the physical 'feel' of France and the French, and let us dispatch the matter by agreeing that when properly used such materials do indeed contribute greatly to the construction of an understanding of what Frenchmen are like and how they live. But let us add that such materials are very inadequate, generally oriented toward culture 'in the other sense' or toward the simplest possible aspects of culture 'in the anthropological sense': they really deal in most cases with the same kind of carefully

and artificially circumscribed snippets of 'life' that we find in the books on 'French culture' that we have described. In none of these cases do we have credible Frenchmen, 'frozen in their tracks' in public and in private and in all their rich complexity so that we can take a long hard look at them as they really are, as they really live their daily lives, as they write their own literature, and as they read it -- as they function as facts in the world in which the rest of us live.

Let me pause, at this point, to consider what I should like to call the French microcosm. It seems to me that one of the principal reasons why France and the French exert such a constant and powerful attraction on thoughtful foreigners is to be found in the great diversity of life that manifests itself in all spheres within the matrix of the modern French state; nowhere else do we find in a single national society such variety and such breadth of knowledge, opinion, preference and prejudice locked together within the framework of a consciously understood common membership in a clearly definable cultural tradition. Conditions are such furthermore, that in France that diversity is clearly and regularly articulated and debated by perspicacious minds of great cultivation and sophistication. That variety runs the gamut through all possible shades of opinion in politics, economics, religion, art; in short, the whole problem of adapting the past to our very different present -- a problem faced of necessity by all nations large and small, albeit in varying degrees of intensity -- can be studied with relative ease in this French microcosm. Now, contemporary French experience and thought is most readily accessible in contemporary French literature and this observation leads logically to a consideration of what it is legitimate to mean by literature.

Typically, the literature of a given people is two things: contemporary literature, or the public forum of discussion in which the struggle to understand, analyze, organize and record experience and rational thought takes place in a serious, careful way, and, secondly, the literary tradition or classical canon, a sort of museum of the best thought of the cultural ancestors of those for whom it is tradition. This, in turn, means at least three things. First, there is the accumulation and transmission of thought which was once new and is now only revered. Secondly, there is a concomitant accumulation of linguistic wealth: the

intellectual and aesthetic struggles of the past have yielded new language and the written record preserves and transmits the aggregate of that achievement. Lastly, there is inevitably a certain residue of valuable but unexploited insight, thought and linguistic treasure in the canon of literature that comes to us from out the past. In short, French literature, for instance, considered as a unitary corpus of texts, is a record of the conscious, collective experience of the French people as it has accumulated through the last millennium, the record of the evolution of a view of the world, much of which passed through the prism of public debate and was eventually refined into formal scholarship and science or entered in other ways into the cultural heritage transmitted to succeeding generations. Certainly not the least of the products of the experience is the French language itself. It is clear, then, that a language and the literature of which it is the vehicle, partial cause and partial effect cannot be considered apart from their cultural matrix as the whole has evolved in time as an inseparable amalgam.

I should like now to quote from a work which is familiar indeed to many among you, Robert L. Politzer's, Teaching French, An Introduction to Applied Linguistics. In the last chapter of that work, Chapter X, entitled "Conclusion: The Cultural and Literary Context", Professor Politzer says (pg. 169 of the second edition) "There seems, nevertheless, to be some valid reason for connecting language instruction with anthropological culture rather than "culture" (and Literature), at least at the beginning level. The very understanding of literary works often depends on the grasp of the cultural environment in which their plots, characters, and themes operate. Of course, it is quite possible to approach culture through the literary work. Nor do we want to question the judicious use of literary works or the value of the learning or memorization of poetry in elementary courses. But we must keep in mind that the facets of culture presented in a literary work may be atypical, and particular care must be taken to choose literary works which will produce a real understanding of culture rather than an erroneous impression. And what is said about the teaching of culture applies even more to the realm of language: the language of the literary work is apt to be atypical. Many literature scholars and linguists believe that the very essence of literature may be defined by its use of special structure and vocabulary (this is obviously the case in poetry), and the very possibility of appreciating a literary work de-

pends very often on recognizing the departures it makes from the structure and vocabulary of normal, everyday speech patterns. Only after we learn standard French can we really appreciate the individual particularly in the style of a Proust, a Camus, a Gide." (Italics mine.)

Now, as we look about us in search of materials which we might use to present Frenchmen as flesh-and-blood people living largely routine lives within the framework of French social, political and economic institutions and cast in 'neutral', 'typical', 'standard' French, we find that there is in fact precious little material that has been prepared for classroom use; I suggest, however, that there is a vast reservoir of material which is eminently suitable for this purpose and from which we have but to choose: the French Detective Story.

It is interesting to note that only the Americans, the English and the French produce a steady stream of varied home-grown detective fiction. The proportion of detective fiction written by native authors is much smaller in other large national societies (Germany, Italy, Spain for example)

Stop to consider for a moment what some of the principal characteristics of good detective fiction are. Detective stories are written to be read rapidly by people who read the language in which they are written with ease and who are familiar with the context in which the plots are set; for our present purposes, I am speaking, of course, of French detective stories with a French setting, as opposed to detective stories written perhaps by Frenchmen and in any case in French but perhaps about people who are not French and set in foreign places. The characters in such stories, with the exception of some of the villains and with the exception of the foreigners (and even they are interesting in that they often reveal archetypal French notions about 'typical' members of particular foreign cultures) are regularly typical members of subgroups within French society: professors, lawyers, policemen, doctors, butchers, bakers, housewives, garbage collectors and what have you. The language of detective fiction is, in the great majority of cases, unexceptionable and neutral. The fact that the language in which such novels is cast is neutral is particularly crucial; we have just considered Professor Politzer's remarks about 'literary language' and it is clear, I think, from a consideration of those astute observations that the best possible preparation we can give a student to enable him to approach French literature,

France and Frenchmen with maximum advantage to himself, to his country and to "our friends the French", is to equip him with thorough knowledge of precisely that kind of 'neutral' French, which he can then compare with the French of specific ordinary people or of gifted intellectuals, writers and statesmen, and distinguish, approximately as the well educated Frenchman does, between what, on the one hand, is typical, subliminal, 'neutral' French, and what on the other hand, the significant, personal differences are which will stand out and attract the attention of the French themselves. Clearly, an ability to distinguish what sounds ordinary, routine, and merely 'sensible' to the French from what strikes such an audience as new, 'strange', exceptional, or even 'brilliant' is necessary and useful equipment for the American who must deal with the fascinating if sometimes frustrating French. (Let me profess publicly, at this point, my obvious personal commitment to la civilisation et la culture françaises!)

It is very revealing that, by and large, the reader of detective fiction, will simply stop reading a story which does not convince him; in other words, the French reader will not continue to wade through a story which implicitly -- according to the 'rules of the game' -- purports to paint 'typical', 'credible' Frenchmen possessing certain characteristics (a certain status in society, a particular education, a specific occupation, and so on) as they behave in typical situations (situations defined, of course, in terms of French 'culture' -- the French 'way of life') but will reject such a piece of writing if it fails to depict life convincingly as he thinks he knows it if, that is, the people, places and events portrayed in it as background for the main plot are such that they thrust themselves into his conscious mind and call attention to themselves; the main action of the plot is usually, of course, not the sort of thing the French reader expects to experience routinely in daily life and he is fully prepared by his understanding of the 'rules of the game' of detective fiction to countenance -- on that level -- characters, behavior and situations that are not typical (after all, most Frenchmen do not find corpses in the corridor or robbers behind rubber plants!). Parenthetically, though, I suppose we must admit that careful study would probably reveal that the French have definable ideas about typical crimes and criminals (as do we), that in both societies, France and the

United States, there is a discernible correlation between newspaper accounts of 'actual' crimes and those typical notions, and lastly, that the French 'set' of typical crimes and criminals does not correlate very well with our own! In addition, not only must the majority of the characters in such fiction be generally representative of the unconscious notions held by thoroughly enculturated Frenchmen of what typical members of corresponding groups within their own society are like, in their reactions, their way of life, their way of talking, their preferences and prejudices, but the very institutions and situations in terms of which those characters function in the context of such a piece of fiction must also 'ring true' (for they are also essentially subliminal): these are, for example, the organs of the state, the school system, attitudes and habits, holidays and their rites and rituals, the transportation system, the legal system, and so on, with which a fully acculturated Frenchman is familiar and which he does not need to have explained to him -- for which he does not need footnotes! Let us stop to remark that the well educated Frenchman may, of course, not fully 'understand' these institutions. He may not have readily articulable notions of how a typical French doctor, lawyer, etc., talks, dresses, and so on, but he possesses a very real and essentially coherent subliminal model of such people and their predictable, expected behavior; similarly, he may well be incapable of explaining to a foreigner how the judicial system is organized; although he 'understands' his daily paper!

Archetypal Frenchmen, who 'ring true' to flesh-and-blood Frenchmen, in other words, appear and interact with one another within a framework of archetypal French institutions and situations in much French detective fiction, and at best this is presented in a language which is neutral, archetypal. In other words, the language of the best French detective fiction cannot be readily identified (even by those who are most hopelessly addicted to this kind of reading) as the work of any particular author. (I should acknowledge that, of course, some excellent detective fiction in French has already been adapted to these purposes; the most obvious example is some of the work of Georges Simenon, one of whose characteristics is very profound insight into the fabric of French society and a masterful ability to portray that society in unexceptionably

'neutral' French!)

Finally, it seems to me that one of the principal advantages inherent in the use of such materials, over and above those which I have already mentioned, is that such fiction is very likely to interest young readers, and we certainly hope that increasingly as time goes on French -- and other major languages -- will no longer be <u>begun</u> by students on the college level; that is to say, that with few exceptions college students will bring with them from their earlier schooling a substantial, solid training in one at least of the major languages and be ready to use that knowledge to pursue advanced studies on the college level. That earlier training <u>must</u> include as much detailed enculturation as possible (even though it is <u>vicarious</u>) into the subtleties of the foreign 'view of the world'-- in the subtle ways which lowly, oft despised, 'non-literary' detective fiction makes possible!

Let me suggest too that French detective fiction has inherent in it enormously, even endlessly fascinating possibilities for the teacher of French to put his trips to and through France to good use. Specifically: if a teacher has read a fair number of such works and has selected one or more which he feels would be useful tools to teach French and 'about the French' to his own students (with whatever judicious editing may seem appropriate!), in this day and age of relatively cheap and easy travel and inexpensive and simple cameras, he can organize at least part of a summer's trip to France around a project, the ultimate product of which would be a motion-picture film or a set of slides (easily convertible into film strips) showing storefronts, apartment houses, parks, specific monuments, schoolyards, street scenes, landscapes and so on, similar to those which figure prominently in the texts he wishes to use to impart a knowledge of France and the French. In other words, an interested, ingenious teacher of French should find it easy indeed -- and personally enjoyable as well as intellectually and professionally rewarding -- to make visual materials of his own to accompany such texts in the classroom. If well done, such materials might well interest commercial publishers, particularly if they are coupled with careful editing of the text itself. There is, of course, the additional fact that such materials would be the teacher's own; that is, he would be in a position to elaborate at some length on the specifics of the places shown in his slides, which ability should inspire greater interest in his

students and when questions arise and he is able to answer them convincingly and in detail, should serve to reinforce his students' confidence in what they are learning and in the teacher himself!

The kind of "culture" that we have been talking about is largely subliminal and culture of the same order is, of course, largely subliminal for us in our own society. The great majority of participants in a given culture are quite unable to describe overtly and accurately by far the greater part of the fabric of habitual actions, reactions, preferences and prejudices -- values -- that is subsumed under the rubric culture. Most people mistake most of their own culture for part of 'the natural order' and are baffled by the failure of foreigners to behave in ways that they consider self-evident and "right". By now all this is common knowledge, as it is commonplace to explain much conflict between participants in different cultures in terms of correspondingly different expectations of behavior in particular circumstances. Now, works of detective fiction, if carefully chosen, can, I suggest, reveal to the sophisticated reader a very large part of such culture; the trick to be turned is precisely to select texts that are maximally useful for this purpose and then to edit them appropriately. For best results, what is needed is teams of specialists to collaborate in the production of numerous such works (the more of them there are easily available, the better). Such teams must include at least a language specialist and a sociologist-anthropologist whose special interest is the particular culture in question -- France, in this instance -- and others as needed: political scientists, geographers, economists, who should, of course, be expert in French political institutions, etc....

The task of isolating covert cultural phenomena can best be undertaken by such experts -- and I am well aware that what I am suggesting would be neither easy nor inexpensive! -- but their work must then be edited with the greatest care, lest what they say be cast in terms too difficult for the student to grasp! We are all well aware how easy it is to write technical statements intended for audiences of specialists, and what arduous labor it is to expound subtle notions in clear, straightforward language without thereby falsifying them.

The ultimate fruits of such endeavors should be far more sophisticated understanding by our students of the French and their ways, and that understanding should lead in turn to subtler insights into the United States and into the relativity of culture as inevitable comparisons and contrasts generate ever subtler appreciation of reality.